History in Scott's Novels

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Contents.

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In this paper, it is our purpose to show how Sir Walter Scott handled history in his so called historical novels, concrete illustrations being taken from Kenilworth, The Abbot, and The Fortunes of Nigel. As an introduction to this study we will give briefly, Scott's own theory of a historical romance.

Scott regarded himself as a romancer — not as a historian and in so doing felt that he was not to be measured by the standard which a historian is called upon to satisfy. When he departed from the facts of history he was usually aware of it, and believed by such departure he was best serving his art and his readers. We know from the prefaces to

Ivanhoe and Quentin Durward, that Scott had a definite idea of the historical novel, and in the main followed it, though he was not always able to adhere strictly to his outline of plot when developing a novel.

To Scott, there was a difference between history and the historical novel. In the latter, instead of a mere series of historical episodes with no central point, there was to be a unity of form developed out of the history of a period or put into it by the imaginative genius of the author, the occurrences to be so magnified as to form a complete picture. Scott felt that if he represented the preceding ages in general outline as they were and remained true to the character of the times with which he dealt, that he was at liberty to pay

tribute to his art, and thus he justified his freedom.

Perhaps we can get his point of view from a portion of the Dedicatory Epistle to Ivanhoe, in which he writes:

"The scantiness of materials is indeed a formidable difficulty, but to those deeply read in antiquity hints concerning the private life of our ancestors lie scattered through the pages of our various historians, bearing a slender proportion to the other matters of which they treat, but still, when collected together, sufficient to throw considerable light upon the vie privée of our forefathers. * * The severe antiquary may think by undermining light fiction with truth, I am polluting the well of history with modern inventions and imposing upon the rising generation

false ideas of the age which I describe. It is true that I neither can nor do pretend to the observation of complete accuracy even in matters of outward costume, much less in the more important points of language and manners. It is necessary for exciting interest of any kind that the subject assumed should be translated into the manners as well as the language of the times in which we live.

"In this book, Ivanhoe, I have so far explained our ancient manners in modern language and so far detailed the characters and sentiments of my persons that the modern reader will not find himself, I hope, much trammelled by the repulsive dryness of mere antiquity. In this, I respectfully contend, I have in no respect exceeded

the fair license due to the author of a fictitious composition. The late ingenious Mr. Strutt ---- limited the popularity of his Queenhoo Hall by excluding from it everything which was not sufficiently obsolete to be altogether forgotten and unintelligible.

"The passions, the sources from which sentiments and manners must spring in all their modifications, are generally the same in all ranks and conditions of all countries and ages; and it follows, as a matter of course, that the opinions, habits of thinking and actions, however influenced by the peculiar state of society must still, upon the whole, bear a strong resemblance to each other."

We do not maintain that Scott was always accurate in his historical data, for he was not,

had Shakspere's justification for manipulating the facts of history was, that he must have "dramatic effects", and it was for these "dramatic effects" that Scott tampered with the facts. He crowded together incidents, interchanged episodes and brought in events which did not occur nor for which there is any authority in the records of the time. But why was a writer of fictitious romance not justified in prolonging Amy Robsart's life fifteen years so that she could meet Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth, if by so doing he could present a dramatic situation and portray in vivid colors with a few strokes, the pomp, the show, the gayety and the crimes of the Elizabethan period?

Scott knew he was not adhering to fact when he had

Queen Elizabeth in 1575 refer
to A Midsummer Night's Dream,
but this was an effective thing
for the Queen to do, and who was
going to read his novels for
history? When critics called
his attention to these anach-
ronisms, Scott coolly called
their attention to others they
had not observed.

But there is a difference
between misrepresenting
facts and misrepresenting
the distinguishing characte-
ristics of a period. The latter
was not as important in
Scott's eyes as the spirit, and
so keen was his appreciation
of the spirit that the facts
almost arranged themselves
to fit the times. Although
there have been objections to
Scott's representation of me-
dieval life because it is not
accurate, popular appreciation
has not been lessened on this

account. He is accused of not having understood Gothic architecture, the language of feudal times, and the relations between the Saxons and the Normans. What does this matter? If we get the spirit and the general effect we can dispense with precision of detail.

In 1895 the Quarterly Review stated:

"If Scott has given us such pictures of historical events or such estimates of historical personages as are calculated to convey false impressions, where false impressions may be mischievous and seriously pervert our judgment on political or religious subjects, that is a fair matter for criticism and marshy of general admiration. But many of the objections raised to Scott's feudal

pictures are fit only to be discussed by a society of antiquarians."

The historian knows of Scott's inaccuracies so he comes to the Waverley novels prejudiced, not willing to acknowledge that the genius of the author in making felt the life of an age outweighs the disagreement in dates. Some of our modern critics are especially severe, one of whom has written:

"Scott is not the only novelist who has poisoned with his cleverly woven plots the dry facts of history, or incorrectly portrayed the character of some eminent personage. * * Sir Walter Scott, by the magic of his genius, will bewitch his audience into believing him to have been an expert writer of history as well as of romance."

The historical novels of Scott ---- will still command a wide circulation when the works of our leading modern historians shall have been left unread and undusted on the bookshelf."

When we remember that Scott is not studying the private life of the individual so much as the character of a reign, we find it less justifiable that the criticism of historical inaccuracy should be urged against him. Perhaps Lord Bacon's maxim that a mixture of a lie doth ever add pleasure, is not especially fitting as applied to Scott, for his truth gives pleasure as often as his lie, but we are reminded of this saying when we read severe criticisms on him for his misleading statements having to do with history.

It seems to us, that in Scott we see the Middle Ages as men of those times saw them and not as modern historians see them, many of whom though unintentionally, judge the past centuries and their conditions by nineteenth century standards. There is a historical perspective which is very hard for even historians of our times to obtain. They often give us the impression that certain features of the old days of chivalry were as much a marvel to the people of that time as they are to us. In the days of cruder civilization and less organized conditions of society men must have regarded much of the injustice and inequality with the view, that, whatever is, is right — and though oppression was felt in ancient

Rome and early England it was endured rather than criticised and opposed.

Scott has been severely criticised for painting only one side — the brilliant side of the times with which he deals, the pleasant side of the people — and for not giving enough of the realistic blackness which existed. These critics are viewing the reign of James I. from the standpoint of a modern Englishman or American, and not, as we believe, an Englishman of the seventeenth century viewed it.

Some knowledge of the principle governing him in the selection of his periods may be gathered from his preface to "The Fortunes of Nigel," in which he has written:

"The reign of James I. gave unbounded scope to human-

dion in the fable while at the same time it afforded greater variedy and discrimination of character than could, with historical consistency have been introduced if the scene had been laid a century earlier. ------ The most picturesque period of history is that when the ancient rough and wild manners of a barbaric age are just becoming innobated upon and contrasted by the illumination of increased or revived learning and the instructions of renewed or reformed religion. The strong contrast produced by the opposition of ancient manners, to those which are gradually subduing them, affords the lights and shadows necessary to give effect to a fictitious narrative."

In the introduction to

Ivanhoe are given reasons for changing material and for the choice of the period.

"It is plain that frequent publication must finally wear out the public favor unless some mode could be devised to give the appearance of novelty to subsequent productions. The period of the narrative adopted, was the reign of Richard I, not only as abounding with characters whose very names were sure to attract general attention, but as affording a striking contrast between the Saxons, by whom the soil was cultivated, and the Normans who still reigned in it as conquerors."

Scott seemed to have had almost an instinct for discerning what material would work up well and lend itself to a combination of romance and history. Other

novelists have made more subtle analysis of character and given more excellent minute description than he, but they have written mostly of their own times and countries, while Dickens and Thackeray were not more at home in London than Scott was in dealing with the Crusaders and Elizabethans.

In the preceding pages, reference has been made to Scott's variation from the facts of history, and as illustration of this some study of the anachronisms in Kenilworth was undertaken, with the following results.

Scott says that Amy Robsart, the heroine, was the daughter of "Sir Hugh Robsart, whose seat was called Lidcote Hall, on the Frontier of Devonshire," and later, he states that Sir Hugh died very soon after his

daughter. History tells us that the real Amy Robsart was the only, legitimate, child of Sir John Robsart, whose estate was in Norfolk. His death seems to have taken place over six years before Amy's death at Cumnor, which, history records, occurred in 1560, but Scott is pleased to present her at Kenilworth during the festivities in 1575. As to Amy's marriage, from the novel, we learn of a secret union and life with Lord Dudley, which does not coincide with the fact that, on June 4, 1550, their marriage ceremony was performed publicly in the presence of King Edward VI at Sheen, Richmond.

On September 24, 1564, Lord Robert Dudley was created Earl of Leicester, and as Amy Robsart died in 1560, she

was never more than Lady Robert Dudley, though Scott mentions her throughout Kenilworth as the "Countess of Leicester."

Anthony Forster, the guardian of Cumnor Hall, or Forster, as it appears in the Chronicles, is described in Kenilworth as "a vulgar, low-bred, puritanical churl," while history represents him as anything but a "puritanical churl" and vulgar man — rather, as a high minded gentleman and scholar. He and his wife lived at Cumnor place, ending it till 1561, the year after Amy Robsart's death, when they purchased the estate from Dillian Owen.

Richard Varney, or Verney, did exist, but there is no record of his being in the service of Leicester, though in letters written by him to Burghley, 1575, Leicester

mentions "a young Barney" for whom he acted as guardian.

In chapter XVII of Kenilworth, the Lord of Lincoln is represented as having said, "My Lord of Sussex must be excused for his rude and old world housekeeping, since he has as yet no wife." Barney remarked concerning Sussex, that the Queen took him up roundly and asked what my Lord Sussex had to do with a wife.

In April 1555, Lord Sussex was married to Frances Sidney, foundress of Sidney-Sussex College, Cambridge, who lived till 1589.

One of the persons whom Scott has made to figure in the festivities at Kenilworth, is Sir Walter Raleigh; but if histories are to be believed, during the year 1575, the year in which the revels took place, he was not in England

at all, but was abroad during the entire year.

As is fitting for the court of Elizabeth, a number of great dramatists and literary men are discussed, and also quoted. Among these is Shakspere. He was born in 1564, although in 1575 he is represented as having already written "Venus and Adonis," 1593, and Elizabeth quotes from "Troilus and Cressida," 1609, which must therefore have been produced by a boy of eleven. In chapter XVII, Leicester says:

"Ha, Will Shakspere — Child Will! — thou hast given my nephew, Philip Sidney, love powder — he cannot sleep without thy Venus and Adonis under his pillow," though in reality Venus and Adonis was not published till after the death of Sir Philip Sidney.

According to Scott, "Arcadia" was written before 1575, whereas Sidney did not begin it till 1580 and it was not published till 1590.

The period presented in Kenilworth is the most questionable in Elizabeth's whole life, and presumably Scott made a deliberate choice of this as he did of the most brilliant period of Mary Stuart's, for the abbot, as seeming to him to be the most suitable background for the contrasted characters of the two queens. In the Introduction to Kenilworth he writes:

"A certain degree of success, real or supposed, in the delineation of Queen Mary, naturally induced the author to attempt something similar respecting her sister and foe, the celebrated Elizabeth;"—

and as Scott was an ardent

and loyal Scotchman, we can judge for ourselves what his attitude toward Mary's "sister and foe" was.

Historians portray Elizabeth as a peculiar combination of masculine and feminine qualities, but Scott has brought out more strongly the masculine side of her nature, subordinating any feminine charms and graces she might have had. We see her as a "great unmarriable sovereign" — politic, shrewd, weighing results against immediate gain, unscrupulous, when desired ends could be obtained only by deceit, persevering and governing her subjects by her powerful will, capricious and vindictive, craving admiration and fond of flattery. Yet this picture is brilliant, for Scott has touched the facts of history and they glow with life

fire and color.

Those who know the Waverley novels must be surprised to find in them so many and such widely different historical portraits, all executed by the hand of such a master that they seem "to follow us about, as if with living eyes," instead of being masses of lines and colors, and so instinct with life and character that ample atonement seems to have been made for a little deviation from the dry-as-dust statistics and facts which constitute only the skeleton of history, and tell us as much about it as an anatomical museum does of human character."

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Sussex and Leicester, shown in Kenilworth, and of Mary Stuart, shown in The Abbot.

While no period of English history is more difficult to depict than that of the struggle of the Stuarts for the crown, yet Scott has succeeded admirably with the portions he has undertaken and no other poet or novelist has been as successful in his treatment of Mary Stuart for a heroine.

Scott's historical novels may be grouped in three classes; those founded on feudalism, those relating to Scottish Reformation, and those concerned with the romance of the Stuarts. Twenty-eight novels, covering more than two hundred years and extending from the deposition of Mary to the reign of George III, what Shakspere did for the wars

of the Roses has been done by Scott for the Stuart cause.

In history or fiction, there is no more tragic character than Mary, Queen of Scots and from her life the author of The Abbot has selected the portion, which, on account of its significant events, their rapid succession and the climaxes involved, is most suitably adapted to poetic or novelistic treatment. Our interest is aroused in the beginning, kept up throughout and is satisfied in the end.

Scott's feeling for Mary was that of a chivalrous knight toward one whom he regarded as a beautiful and unfortunate woman, subjected to the greatest extremes of fortune, yet maintaining throughout the most queenly dignity.

In The Abbot, she is seen as

pre-eminently queenly, beautiful, retaining yet her royal dignity; a woman of accomplishments and quick wit, possessing withal such grace and charm that in place of a mere woman she is an enchantress. The brilliant portrait has been shaded with weaknesses necessary to a consistent characterization, yet they have not lessened the attractiveness of the picture.

Scott refused to write a life of Mary because, he said, that his feeling for her and the facts of history did not seem to agree. He does not tell us anywhere just what this opinion of Mary's guilt was, or just what part he believed her to have taken in the tragedies, yet there is an almost baffling and a mysterious sense of guilt surrounding

her which seems to enhance the power she holds over us. We are convinced of Bothwell's guild and so our sympathy is not for him, but for the imprisoned and unfortunate queen, who to us no longer is simply Mary, Queen of Scots, but one of the most real and fascinating of women.

Sir Walter was hardly less successful in portraying Mary's son, James I in The Fortunes of Nigel. The supposed hero, Nigel, is really in the background and we are interested in him only because through his adventures an opportunity is given us to see James, his court and his associates, Charles and Buckingham. Critics have taken little exception to Scott's characterization of James, "the wisest of fools, and the most foolish of wits."

He is presended in public and in private life, in both showing his pedandry, his meanness and his avarice. Scadd has been faithful to history in contrasting in the personality of James his noble predentions and his mean practices, his occasional generosity and his condinuous greed, his acquaintance with books and his lack of knowledge of men.

Lockhart, in inviting of The Fortunes of Nigel, gives as his judgment, that no other one of Scadd's novels leaves so complete an impression as the picture of an age; that there is hardly a single picturesque point of manners touched by Ben Jonson and his contempararies but has been dowdailed into this story, thus presending a brilliant sketch of the times.

As was mentioned in the beginning of this paper, it was Scott's purpose to give as vividly and as accurately as possible the color and spirit of a period; to be true in general broad outlines, the amplification to be fictitious and according to his own discretion. So it seems to us as if Scott's conception of a historical novel was something like this: A historical novel — not a history but a novel of entertainment, is one in which local color and historical perspective have been observed; in which events of historical interest and well known historical figures have prominent place, though not mere dull historical transcriptions, but flesh and blood characters, infused with life and made interesting by the genius of the author.

This may not be the final type of the historical novel, but it has been adhered to with little variation since Sir Walter's time and is the accepted type today.

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